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# The Profanity of Memory: Temporality and the Rhetoric of 'Too Soon'

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### Abstract

The temporality of public memory is perhaps most evident when there are objections that some irreverent comment is made 'too soon' after a traumatic event. This essay explores this dimension of sacred temporality and a corollary sense of sacred space in relation to moments and spaces of remembrance.

Keywords: humour, public memory, rhetoric, sacred, space, temporality, trauma

On the evening of September 29, 2001—18 days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—the legendary New York Friar's Club held a comic roast of *Playboy* magazine founder and publisher Hugh Hefner. As is customary in these events, a series of popular comedians and celebrities took turns delivering stand-up monologues largely focused on barbed comments directed towards Mr. Hefner. Around the midpoint of the evening, American comedian Gilbert Gottfried—perhaps best known as the voice of the parrot in the popular Disney film *Aladdin*—took his turn. Near the end of his set he made a joke that almost brought proceedings to a rapid halt. While video of the event was broadcast on American cable television and is widely available via the internet, this moment was deleted and, to date, has never been seen in public. By all accounts, Mr. Gottfried made a joke that went something like this—'I'm a little nervous about my flight from New York to Los Angeles because it's scheduled to make a stop at the Empire State Building'. The crowd erupted into angry booing, several individuals shouted out 'too soon', and there was a moment when the event itself seemed likely to implode as a few individuals rose from their seats to leave.<sup>1</sup>

While the impropriety of the comment may seem abundantly clear even now, it is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to ask of this suddenly angered crowd, what exactly was too soon? Surely the objection was not to the notion of frivolity or irreverence. The entire event was about these pursuits and just the night before, no less than the almost sainted Mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, had given his public blessing to humour's return to New York City. In a deeply moving opening for the first post-attack airing of the popular American sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, Giuliani took to the show's stage in 30 Rockefeller Center. He was accompanied by the Police and Fire Commissioners and a number of New York Police officers and firefighters—many of whom had come directly from the World Trade Center site—Ground Zero—and whose uniforms were still covered in ashes. After a poignant rendition by singer Paul Simon of his elegy 'The Boxer', the Mayor had called on all the city's institutions to return to functioning—to get New York back to business. At the conclusion of his speech, *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michael asked the mayor, 'Can we be funny'? The Mayor replied, 'Why start now'? With the audience's roar of laughter at this mild joke, Giuliani seemed to be signalling that the sombre time of grief and mourning had come to an end. Giuliani, the person who had come to personify the city's heroic response to the tragedy, had made the first public post-9/11 joke and, indeed, was arguably the only person who could have done so.<sup>2</sup>

So, if even the mayor of New York was cracking jokes, what was it that so incensed the crowd at the Friar's Club—a legendary comic venue? The audience had, after all, come to hear a roast of famous (or infamous) publisher Hugh Hefner. They had laughed uproariously at crude, off-colour, and distasteful humour from a number of comedians before Gottfried's evidently ill-timed remark. What exactly, we might ask again, was too soon?

The answer, of course, is obvious—in the audience's mind it was too soon to treat the events of September 11 with irreverence. The event was, at least in the linguistic logic, too recent to bear the weight of irreverence. Implicit in this

formulation, although perhaps not yet explicit in the mind of those shouting at the diminutive comedian, was the notion that at some point in the future this kind of irreverence would be appropriate—but just not now, not this soon. I would like to suggest that this notion—the notion of ‘too soon’—suggests a temporal orientation that might best be understood as the sacred time of trauma. The angry audience members were not suggesting that the events of September 11 were somehow divine and, so, not invoking a literal sense of the sacred but, rather, a sense of a ‘secular sacred’. This sense of the secular sacred is deeply interrelated with notions of public trauma and is, as I will seek to demonstrate, reenacted in public rituals of remembrance. The ‘secular sacred’ in public remembrance is provoked in relation to, indeed often in response to, moments in which the sacred remembrance is perceived to be profaned. This article explores some of the complex dynamics between the secular sacred of remembrance and what I will call the profanity of memory.

In what follows, I will briefly sketch out the relationship between trauma, memory, and the sacred. Next, I will examine the notion of sacred temporality in relation to the profanity of ‘too soon’. In the third section, I will explore the corollary notion of sacred space in relation to the profanity of ‘too close’ (the common but less clearly articulated cousin of ‘too soon’). The paper concludes with a brief reconsideration of the political and rhetorical prospects of the profanity of memory.

### Trauma, The Sacred and Public Memory

What does it mean to speak of trauma or to call an event traumatic? First and foremost, it is to acknowledge an event as decidedly different from those events that are, by contrast, ordinary. Our day-to-day lives are made up of events at times comforting and at others challenging, filled with intense emotions and with languid banality. Within the range of the ordinary we may encounter things that unsettle or disturb us and even those that threaten our physical and mental well-being. But traumatic events are of such a magnitude as to exist in an entirely different stratum of experience. The traumatic represents, in a way, the extreme limit point by which the spectrum of our daily experience is bounded.

In her foundational work on the notion of trauma, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth observes that in its broadest sense, ‘trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena’.<sup>3</sup> The event of trauma is thought to be so overwhelming as to rupture the very boundaries of the subject experiencing trauma—as Ruth Leys notes, ‘owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed’.<sup>4</sup> The traumatized subject is often thought of as shattered, left in fragments by the event and in this way almost irrevocably damaged.

This experience of trauma is so overwhelming that it often exceeds our capacity to actually know our experience of it, at least at the time and in this way, as Caruth puts it, a traumatic event may be defined in part by 'an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of a belatedness'.<sup>5</sup> The experience of trauma, in other words, can often not be fully known at the time of its occurrence but, instead, flashes back to us over time. Trauma, in this way, represents a rupture in normal time and one that is able to 'reverse' temporality in the sense that fragments of the experience can flash back into the present thereby inverting our sense of linear time.

Trauma, then, consists of an experience so overwhelming and violent that it shatters not only the experiencing subject but also the experience itself. Trauma occurs not so much in its singular event but in the re-experienced fragments of the shattered event moving anachronistically from past to present. For individuals who have experienced trauma, much of the work of rehabilitative therapy is in seeking to reintegrate these fragments of both experience and subjectivity. As Robert Jay Lifton contends, 'recovery from post-traumatic effects, or from survivor conflicts, cannot really occur until that traumatized self is reintegrated'.<sup>6</sup> Traumatized subjects, in other words, must find ways to contain and constrain the overwhelming experience and re-experience of the traumatic events in ways that help the fragmented self to be refashioned into a coherent whole. And, of course, just as we can speak of individual trauma, we can also speak of collective trauma—violent shocks to our community that render us fragmented, overwhelmed, and which flash back to us over time.

Of interest for present purposes is the way this relatively common description of trauma parallels our sense of the experience of the sacred. In his landmark study of the sacred and the profane, Mircea Eliade<sup>7</sup> notes that, like trauma, the sacred is also defined in part by its extraordinary nature—'the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from "natural" reality'.<sup>8</sup> The otherworldly experience of the sacred is also often understood not in a sense of comfort or euphoria but, rather, as Rudolph Otto notes in his seminal *The Idea of the Holy*, 'a terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instill'.<sup>9</sup> It is an experience that fills us with awe and is, therefore, literally awful.

The sacred constitutes an experience of a different reality—one that is both terrifying and absolute. For the religious person, the experience of the sacred then constitutes a rupture in the perceived reality of the everyday—that which is of the normal or, quite literally, the profane. Indeed, the sacred is most often understood in contrast to the profane in which the former is an absolute, terrifying, and overwhelming divine truth and the latter is the relative, comforting, and ordinary reality of 'human truth'. While the sacred is typically associated with the transcendent, Dominick LaCapra argues 'the sacred may itself be immanent, may somehow appear in the world, even as it ecstatically and diremptively escapes it'.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the sacred, the touch of the divine, was often associated in earlier times with madness. Plato conceived of divine intervention as creating a kind of madness—true love was one of those types of divine *mania*. And, in

his annotation of Antigone, Friedrich Hölderlin describes a sense of 'sacred madness'—a moment when the soul 'evades consciousness' and achieves a higher manifestation, one that is 'more soul than language'. The experience of the sacred, as with trauma, constitutes a terrifying experience – one that fractures our perception of reality as it fractures our own capacity to perceive. Like trauma, the sacred exceeds, indeed overwhelms, both perception and the perceiver.<sup>11</sup>

As with the violent experience of the traumatic, the awesome experience of the sacred is also contained and circumscribed. For the ancients, as with contemporary believers, the divine is located within coherent narratives, is bounded within particular times—festivals, holy days, fasts—and within particular spaces—shrines, temples, reliquaries. Since the sacred is always already everywhere and at all times, our seeking to contain it constitutes recognition that sacred time, like traumatic time, is anachronistic. It is a gesture back to the time of origin, to the sacred time that exceeds and undergirds the profanity of ordinary time. In a similar way, sacred space gestures to a clearing away of the chaotic, fragmented space of the profane and a recovery of, as Eliade puts it, 'an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse'.<sup>12</sup>

The traumatic and the sacred are both extremes, existing beyond the ordinary and the profane world in which we live most of our lives. While the parallels between the two concepts seem clear, there are also parallels to a much more ordinary experience: the experience of memory. Here I am not thinking of the kind of mundane efforts at recollection we often call memory—'where did I leave my car keys?' 'What's his name?' 'How many drinks have I had tonight?'—but, instead, of the kinds of memories that arise, emerge, engulf us, often without notice and often unbidden. A flash of childhood friends, a game of kick the can in a green backyard, of a dare to climb higher and higher into a magnolia tree, the shouts of encouragement from below, the crack of the thinner limbs near the top.

This kind of memory is, of course, also defined in part by the fact that it is extraordinary—we do not live in a constant state of memory but, rather, in the regular flow of normal time. But at times, these memories appear and draw us out of normal time into the time of memory. This experience of memory is not necessarily ours to control although we can at times seek to invoke it. Invoke seems a proper term here as it gestures towards a sense of the mystical and, indeed, sacred – from the Latin *invocare*: to call upon. As American Philosopher Charles Scott notes,

Memories are already 'there' when we speak or think, not as an origin, but as inheritances, structures, associations, inevitabilities, possibilities, forms of enactment. Protean, fluid, in constant differential continuities and enablements—we do not seem able to step outside of memories as we speak them, to bracket them or neutralize them. We seem to be in and through them.<sup>13</sup>

While not the overwhelming force of the experience of the sacred or traumatic, the experience of memory in this sense also entails a kind of fracturing; the fracturing of our self (or selves) into present and past. There is the me

remembering and the me remembered—though even here it is not always clear which is the agent and which the object. Is the remembering me, the me of now, the agent invoking the memory of my past self as an object—or, at least at times, is that remembered me, the one playing out the endless, repeating loop of some past tragedy or triumph, pleasure or pain, the agent to which I am the object. The present me subjected to this endless loop, perhaps, at times, tormented by it.

This kind of memory—the unbidden, undisciplined kind—created great anxiety among the ancients. Plato worried that the unruly nature of unconstrained memory could lead to misjudgments and false knowledge. His student Aristotle took a step further—condemning the capacity for this kind of vivid, uncontrolled memory and preferring instead a more disciplined approach to relating to our past in what he called recollection. This focus on disciplined recollection helped to spawn the enormous number of mnemonic techniques and frameworks that drew the attention of so many ancient philosophers and rhetoricians.

In an earlier essay, I suggested that a similar anxiety about unconstrained memory can also be seen in our contemporary push to craft official monuments and memorials to particular events.<sup>14</sup> Unconstrained memories pose a threat to our cultural perception of a single public narrative of our past and so, just as Plato feared individual memory might lead to misjudgments, we fear that unconstrained public memories might lead to multiple, conflicting senses of our shared past. So, as with Aristotle, we have developed numerous practices designed to discipline our public memories—disciplines of public recollection that work to craft singular, coherent, public remembrance: the museums, the monuments, the archives.

These sites and times of public remembrances—supported by the mechanisms of public recollection—serve to limit and constrain the diversity of public memories by reinforcing a clear narrative of our shared past. This is the crucial work of crafting a secular sacred—a civic faith that founds our unity whether this is in the mythology of the founding fathers and orthodoxy of American exceptionalism or New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi. Here, to be clear, I mean not to condemn these founding myths—the founding fictions that, as Benedict Anderson contends, help craft our imagined communities.<sup>15</sup> But, rather, I mean to note that they serve as a kind of secular sacred in crafting an absolute point and time of origin, and craft a set of civic religious practices that bring us to collective moments of remembrance, whether at the New Zealand Treaty House or on the Washington, DC Mall; whether on 6 February or 4 July.

The sacred bonds of the imagined, or perhaps better remembered, community are most evident when challenged in moments of collective trauma. The terrorist attacks on 11 September were such a time in America. The trauma created an extended moment of the sacred secular in America; a period of reverence for the fractured bonds of national self-conception. The days after 9/11 (and even to this day) saw a proliferation of the symbols of nationalism—the flags fly more prominently, 'God Bless America' sung during the seventh inning of Major League Baseball games, the bald eagle reemerging as a palpable symbol of American nationalism and potency. The World Trade Center area became not just Ground Zero of a horrific loss of innocent life but also ground zero for a newly emerging sense of the American secular sacred.

In what follows, I want to turn briefly to this sense of the post-traumatic secular sacred in both temporal and spatial senses, paying particular attention to the strong contrast that is drawn between sacred and profane.

### Sacred Time and the Rhetoric of 'Too Soon'

11 September, 2002. I am in a pub in London, not far from Notting Hill Gate. It is 1:45 p.m. and I have just finished a late lunch after a morning of teaching at the SU center in London. The walls of the still crowded pub are lined with televisions and on each of them is a simulcast of the memorial taking place in New York City for the first anniversary of the 11 September attacks. At 1:46 p.m. GMT, I watch as the solemn participants in the Manhattan event embrace a moment of silence. In the crowded pub in London the embrace is not returned—no one seems to notice the events taking place on the televisions. Conversations continue, a raucous game of darts in the corner, orders are placed. Outside seems equally oblivious—the traffic bumps noisily down the streets, pedestrians chat, horns blare. Something about all this strikes me as very wrong. While I have never been a person prone to sentimental nationalism let alone patriotism, inside I seethe. All the noise, the carrying on, seems deeply offensive, insensitive, profane.

Thinking back on that experience now I realize that for me the world had moved into sacred time; a sacred moment in which ordinary temporality had been arrested, interrupted by, as Eliade puts it, 'the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, "in the beginning"'.<sup>16</sup> But my sacred beginning in the billowing smoke and collapsing towers is not the same for my fellow patrons. While they are aware and undoubtedly were profoundly affected by the events in my homeland, these events are not part of their sacred founding. The sacred moment is inaccessible to them.

The rhetoric of 'too soon' seems to be a naïve recognition of sacred temporality; a recognition that with repetition the sacred time begins to lose its luster. The distinction between the profane and the sacred eases as we move further and further from the originary moment in an increasingly mythical past. But 'too soon' does not refer to any action during the sacred time. James E. Young, foundational scholar of public memory and member of the 11 September memorial jury, has observed the almost immediate rush to design a memorial for the attacks. In an interview with *Architectural Record*, he notes 'I think we all want to see memory accrue slowly over time, but there was a built-in tension to get it planned'.<sup>17</sup> Young's comment is worth unpacking as it reveals a good deal about the way trauma separates sacred from profane time and remembrance from memory. In the wake of the tragedy of 11 September there was pressure to formulate a design for an official remembrance, a memorial site. This was, in part, due to financial issues—no other plans for rebuilding on the incredibly valuable real estate in lower Manhattan could proceed without a memorial design in place. But, there was also pressure deriving from a need for a sense

of closure. Establishing a formal site for remembrance would help to constrain the trauma, to discipline the unruly circulation of memory fragments, to begin the process of national reintegration, to heal. As Erika Doss notes, 'This urgency to commemorate the victims of terrorism stems from pressure to control the meaning of terrorism and to manage its traumatic memory', an effort that however carefully undertaken would be, as Doss puts it, 'beset by competing claims over its meaning, and its commemoration'.<sup>18</sup>

During this sacred time of reintegration, it was 'too soon' for the public emergence of competing claims, meanings, and attitudes. The sacred time of remembrance requires an orthodox focus on the 'right' and 'proper' approach to the past. But, this orthodoxy cannot be maintained. Even the sombre tone of the weeks following the attacks of 11 September saw the gradual easing of the boundaries—the gentle encroachment of the profane into the sacred moment. Rudy Giuliani, the high priest of the sacred moment of 11 September, had on the 28 of September declared the city open for business and blessed the irreverence of *Saturday Night Live*. But Gottfried's irreverence had pushed too far, too quickly. By bringing the sacred originary moment—the emergence of a new America from the ashes of Ground Zero—into irreverence so soon after the official time of mourning had ended, Gottfried presented a profane challenge to the sacredness of the time itself and challenged the singularity of the official moment of remembrance.

In ancient times, holy days were often accompanied by carnivals. As Mikhail Bakhtin points out, the raucous carnivals of 'folk merriment . . . constituted the second, unofficial part of holy days and legal feasts'. And, indeed, one of the social functions of these carnivals was the way 'in which the exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane are levelled and are all drawn into the same dance'.<sup>19</sup> But, where the time of the secular sacred differs from the official religious sacred is in its lack of coherence and structure. Even with the blessing of Mayor Giuliani, the citizens of New York were not ready to cast all reverence to the side and embrace the carnivalesque profanity of Gilbert Gottfried. There was no clear sense of an absolute end to the period of mourning and reverence.

As he stood awkwardly before the offended audience, Gottfried's response gestures towards Bakhtin's connection between the sacred and the grotesquely carnivalesque. Rather than apologize or shrink back from the outrage, Gottfried launched into his own version of an old and traditional joke, the Aristocrats. The basic structure of the joke is simple—a family (mother, father, two children) arrives at a talent agent's office. They then perform an act that is, depending on the individual comic's taste and style, ridiculous and often vulgar. At the end of this absurd act the agent asks what the family calls their act and they say, 'The Aristocrats'. The joke is a standard in large part because it affords comedians a chance to stretch their wings in describing the outrageous qualities and as he stood in the Friar's club, Gottfried's version rose to majestic levels of vulgarity—including various obscene and illegal sexual acts and excretions that might have made even Rabelais blush. The audience roared with laughter, some falling from their seats as Gottfried unfurled his obscene masterpiece. Gottfried's answer to the audience's offence was to give them something even more profoundly

offensive—in a way insisting on the comic absurdity of trying to hold anything sacred, to imagine it can be kept clean in a world replete with the vulgar, grotesque, and profane.

### Sacred Space and the Rhetoric of 'Too Close'

Just as we seek to encapsulate traumatic collective experiences within particular time periods, there is also a strong tendency to craft a spatial sacred. While everyday space is more or less homogenous in terms of meaning and importance, sacred space is qualitatively different and represents, as Eliade puts it, 'a break in the homogeneity of space'. The sacred site represents an 'absolute reality' by reconnecting those passing through it to 'an absolute fixed point, a center'.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the sacred site constitutes an example of what Michel Foucault called a 'heterotopia', a space defined in large part by being other than all other spaces. In Foucault's conception, these 'other spaces' reflected certain values back onto the rest of the world and so the sacred site of memory can be seen as an important reflection of broader cultural values.<sup>21</sup>

In this way, our tendency to visit these sacred sites of memory—our pilgrimages, wreath laying ceremonies, and school trips—represents a desire to reconnect to those core, seemingly universal cultural values. The sacred site stands as an absolute centre and not only the point of origin for our world but the point from which our world re-emerges. Eliade contends that 'no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space' and so for us to imagine the birth of our world—or its re-birth after time of trauma—we are called back out of the chaos of the profane and toward that sacred other space. Monuments and memorials can be thought of us exercising this cultural function in the contemporary secular sacred, a place for the re-founding of our world.

As an interesting example, it is noteworthy that for the first anniversary of the attacks, newly elected New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg chose to have political figures read segments from famous, founding American documents—Abraham Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address', Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' speech. At the now sacred memorial site of Ground Zero, the Mayor chose the eloquent words of the nation's past founders to, in an almost mystical sense, call the nation back into being.

If the reverence paid to the Ground Zero site is not enough to suggest its function as secular sacred within the American consciousness, then the public reaction to what became popularly known as the 'Ground Zero Mosque' should make the point even more clearly. In 2009, developer Sharif El-Gamal announced plans to turn the properties at Park 45-47 into an Islamic cultural centre and prayer space. The property was just 600 feet (180 metres) from the site of the World Trade Center and some of the wreckage from one of the planes had ended up on the roof of the property. The developers imagined the project as occupying a new thirteen-story structure and including educational spaces, a swimming pool,

fitness centre as well as a 'prayer space'. But the public discourse soon labelled the project the 'ground zero mosque' and by early 2010 a majority of Americans surveyed were opposed to the construction, largely on grounds of its proximity to Ground Zero.<sup>22</sup> Daisy Khan, one of the mosque project planners, expressed her shock, 'it never occurred to us. We have been bridge builders for years'.<sup>23</sup> In spite of these stated intentions, as the *New York Times* opined: 'Instead of inspiring mutual respect, the center has opened deep divisions marked by vitriolic commentary, pitting Muslims against Christians, Tea Partiers against staunch liberals, and 11 September families against one another'.<sup>24</sup>

At the heart of this protracted public controversy was a sense that the construction of the Islamic cultural centre represented a profaning of the secular sacred space of the World Trade Center. A mother of one of the 9/11 victims, a firefighter, declared the proposed centre to be 'sacrilege on sacred ground'.<sup>25</sup> There is a deep irony embedded within this proposition. While the Islamic cultural centre was never actually proposed as a formal mosque, its prayer space would have constituted a literally sacred space for Muslim worshippers. Sacred spaces, it would seem, cannot overlap. The sacred prayer space constituted a profane space to those who viewed the World Trade Center as an American sacred space and even more so to those Americans who believed the terrorists represented Islam as a whole.

The controversy over the 'Ground Zero Mosque' escalated throughout 2010 and 2011. Adding to the complex intermixing of sacred and profane, on the ninth anniversary of the attacks, a previously unknown Florida pastor named Terry Jones declared he would burn a copy of the Qur'an unless the proposed centre was moved. The declaration sparked riots throughout Afghanistan, and even President Obama was forced to reiterate the right of any religious group to build a centre wherever they pleased. 'This country stands for the proposition that all men and women are created equal, that they have inalienable rights. And that means if you could build a church on a site . . . you should be able to build a mosque on the site'. The memorial service on that anniversary was accompanied by two public rallies—one in favour and one opposed to the building of the mosque.<sup>26</sup>

The complexity created by overlapping sacred sites of memory is remarkably common. In Auschwitz, for example, there have been on-going struggles between the global Jewish community and the Catholic Church. In 1984, when a convent was established in one of the buildings that had once stored the lethal gas Zyklon B it sparked worldwide protest. Even after Pope John Paul II ordered the nuns to leave the site there have been on-going protests over the Parish Church of Brzezinka, which occupies a former SS building near Auschwitz II. In a January, 2015 editorial for the *Washington Post*, Rabbi Avi Weiss objected to the church's continued presence: 'Its very existence at this sacred Jewish space is inappropriate, misleading and a violation of Shoah memory'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, at the 2015 Venice Biennale, Icelandic artist Christoph Büchel's entry—titled simply 'The Mosque'—was the creation of a functioning Islamic Mosque within the space of Santa Maria della Misericordia, a long unused though not officially deconsecrated Catholic Church. Venice officials shut down the installation citing a host of arcane codes and regulations, but all reports made it clear that the officials felt 'it posed a

security threat because of possible violence either by anti-Islamic extremists or Islamic extremists upset that a mosque has been created inside a church'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, one of the key limitations of sacred thinking in relation to memories of trauma may be our tendency to think of its space and time as inviolable and the assumption that any other discourse or perspective that overlaps with our sense of the sacred is necessarily a profane violation.

The 'Ground Zero Mosque' controversy illustrates the parallels between the secular sacred sites of memory and those sites that are constituted by believers as literally sacred. It also illustrates the limitations of the notion of sacred space, at least as designated within the real world. In her thoughtful analysis of sites of tragedies and terrorism, Marita Sturken notes, 'Sacred ground cannot be, for instance, a neighborhood, which is defined by the ongoing everydayness of life, work, commerce, and public interaction'.<sup>29</sup>

Some recognized this limitation on the idea of the sacred and, so, the 'Ground Zero Mosque' was not without its supporters. Some seemed to recognize the limitations of casting the site of the terror attack in the language of the sacred. An aunt of one 9/11 victim insisted that the mosque represented a positive step in remembering the dead. 'This is a living city. Ground Zero is not a static shrine'.<sup>30</sup> Still, in spite of some support and even the blessing of the President, the Islamic centre eventually closed. By 2014, the developers had abandoned plans for the elaborate centre and announced a museum instead, and by 2015 the building was up for sale with plans for its demolition.<sup>31</sup>

### The Prospects of Profane Memories

The sacred time and site of remembrance declares itself as the pure, absolute, fixed and proper orientation towards our past. Sacred remembrance entails more than just the narrative of the past and its visual depiction but dictates its symbolic meaning and, in ways both powerful and subtle, the affective attitude we are meant to assume. In the bargain to attain this acquiescence, sacred remembrance promises us a fixed and inviolable view of our past—we will never forget. In ways, the various monuments and memorials we erect to the trauma of our past all make this claim. We wish to resolve the jagged hole left by trauma by placing within it a concrete marker, a symbol that we will always remember, always remember this and in this way.

But, of course, sacred remembrance's promises are never upheld. The sacred remembrance cannot forever hold back the tide of profane memories that will, eventually and at times painfully, overwhelm it.<sup>32</sup> It is also worth noting that this profanity of memory does not operate only within the United States. In April 2015, the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park opened in New Zealand's capital, Wellington. Some 500 people came to the dedication, which was designed to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign, the first major campaign for Anzac soldiers during World War I. The 21,000 square metre park

cost nearly \$120 million to create.<sup>33</sup> On 12 May of the same year, the local news reported that the memorial war park 'had become a battered, noisy skate park', the slanted wall now marked with dark scrapes from skateboards. A teenage boy interviewed about this use of the memorial park acknowledged that it might be seen as disrespectful but noted, 'we are using it better than the vast majority of people'.<sup>34</sup>

While these skateboarders may be a particularly profane example of my point, a wander through almost any town or village will likely find other sacred sites of remembrance either in utter disuse or different use—the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial that is featured in downtown Syracuse, for instance, is commonly used as a vantage point to watch summer concerts. It is yet another example by which the seemingly fixed sacred site of remembrance is transformed by the flow of profane memories.

To be clear, when I refer to the profanity of memory I mean more than just examples where previously sacred sites are disused or misused. Instead, I want to suggest by the term 'profane memories' that the singular, unified narrative of the past inevitably unravels in the wider world of fragmented, chaotic, fluid, and contested public memories. In the concluding section of this article, I'd like to pause over this notion of profane memory and consider how these memories function rhetorically.

First, to speak of memories as profane is to acknowledge their fragmented nature. In a way, we ought to refer not to public memory but to public memories. Even the most sacred figure of our past is subject to diverse and divergent memories. Consider the way the historically venerated Christopher Columbus, credited in the history books of my childhood as 'discovering America', has been recast as the first villain in a wider narrative of the genocide of indigenous peoples.

Second, in the wider scope of this fragmentation, there is no absolute authority to fix the chaotic interplay of these divergent memories. While there will be, at least at times, official, authoritative public remembrances, even the most dominant and domineering of these narratives of the past can only, at best, send divergent memories into hiding. But, as we have seen with various geopolitical upheavals, these subaltern public memories are simply biding their time to reemerge and openly contest the official record of the past. The destruction of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the defacement of Soviet World War II memorials in Eastern Europe provide vivid examples of the profaning of the previously held sacred.

Thus, in the realm of profane memories, we find a fluid and dynamic shifting of the fragmented memories of different publics. This is a realm of contest and divisiveness; a realm in which the images of the past can be repositioned and re-appropriated for new purposes by new people. In the United States, recent protests over the killing of unarmed African Americans by police officers has combined with a long-standing cultural division over the place of the Confederate Battle Flag to turn previously disused sites of Civil War memory into vibrant and provocative sites of cultural conflict.

A line of tension exists between these profaning memories and the sites and times of the sacred. We know the points of tension have been provoked when we hear the rhetoric of 'too soon' or 'too close' and watch the outrage and offence

that emerges when our seemingly inviolable and sacred remembrance is pulled back into the chaotic and fluid wash of profane memories. Artists operate along this line of tension; at times, working with the symbolic detritus left by trauma and tragedy and using these remnants of memory to shape and reshape the contours of our cultural experience of the past. This work is, of course, not easy nor will it be without conflict and controversy. But, in the end, the blessing of the profanity of memory is that the conflict will be continuous, propelled by the perpetual struggle between diverse communities. Indeed, it is not the sacred, originary site that gives birth to a world renewed but, rather, the on-going contest over whose vision of the past and with it the inevitable question, what vision of the future.

## Endnotes

1. Frank Rich, "The Greatest Dirty Joke Ever Told," *New York Times*, 13 March 2015, A1, 20.
2. Saturday Night Live, "911 Tribute with Mayor Giuliani", *National Broadcasting Company*, 29 September 2001, <https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/911-tribute-with-mayor-giuliani/n11612>.
3. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 91.
4. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.
5. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 92.
6. Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Litton," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, C. Caruth, ed., (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 137.
7. Eliade is a controversial figure whose broader politics embraced fascism and, in the opinion of many, anti-Semitism. While there is some debate about his personal beliefs, I invoke him here only as a historian of religion. For more on the debates about Eliade's personal politics, see: Philip Ó. Ceallaigh and Bryan Rennie, "Mircea Eliade and Antisemitism: An Exchange," *Los Angeles Review of Books* 13 September 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mircea-eliade-and-antisemitism-an-exchange/>.
8. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 1959), 10.
9. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 14.
10. Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 19.
11. Friedrich Hölderlein, *Friedrich Hölderlein: Essays and Letters on Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 111.
12. Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 21.
13. Charles Scott, *The Time of Memory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 12.
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15. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
16. Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 69.
17. James Young as quoted in Sam Lubell, "Inside the Journey: An Interview With James Young", *Architectural Record*, 01 February 2004.
18. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 168.
19. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 219.
20. Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 21.
21. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.
22. Michael Barbaro, "Debate Heats Up About Mosque Near Ground Zero", *New York Times*, 30 July 2010; Anton Troianovski, "Developer Envisions Landmark Mosque", *Wall Street Journal*, 19 July 2010.
23. Anne Barnard, "For Muslim Center Sponsors, Early Missteps Fueled a Storm", *New York Times*, 11 August 2010, A1.
24. Javier Hernandez, "Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead," *New York Times*, 14 July 2010, A22.
25. Javier Hernandez, "Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead", *New York Times*, 14 July 2010, A22.
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27. Avi Weiss, "Auschwitz is a Sacred Place of Jewish Memory", *Washington Post* 28 January 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/01/28/auschwitz-is-a-sacred-place-of-jewish-memory-its-no-place-for-a-catholic-church/>.
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29. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 200.
30. Javier Hernandez, "Planned Sign of Tolerance Bringing Division Instead", *New York Times*, 14 July 2010, A22.
31. Danika Fears, "Developer Ditches Plan for 'Ground Zero mosque'", *New York Post*, 30 April 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/04/30/developer-ditches-ground-zero-mosque-to-create-museum-for-islam/>.
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